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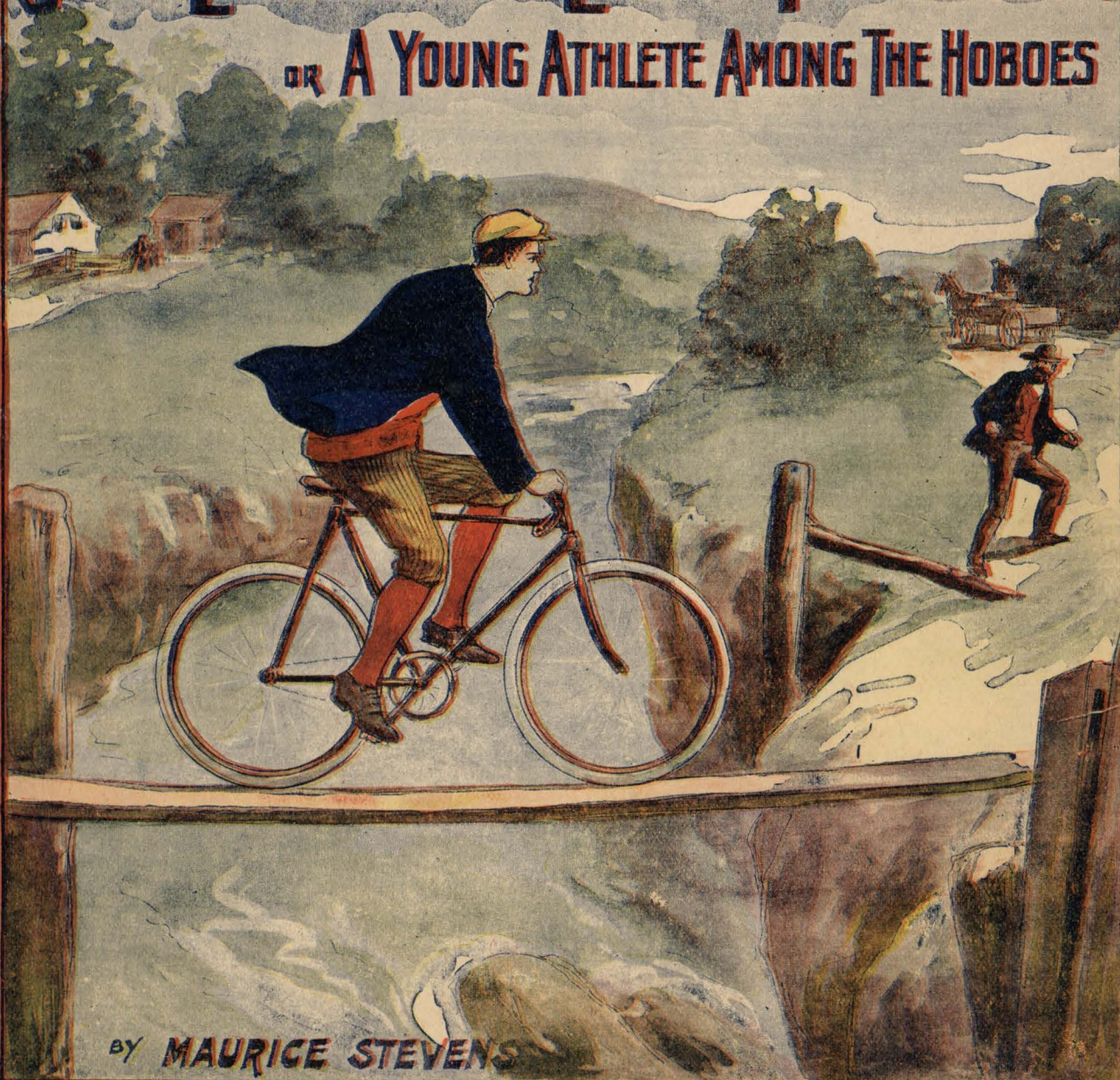
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# ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY



## JACK LIGHTFOOT'S LUCKY PUNCTURE OR A YOUNG ATHLETE AMONG THE HOBOES



BY MAURICE STEVENS

Heedless of danger, Jack pedalled out upon the narrow girder of the dismantled bridge, bent on overtaking the fugitive hobo.



**Publishers' Note.** "Teach the American boy how to become an athlete, and lay the foundation for a Constitution greater than that of the United States."—Wise sayings from "Tip Top." There has never been a time when the boys of this great country took so keen an interest in all manly and health-giving sports as they do to-day. As proof of this witness the record-breaking throngs that attend college struggles on the gridiron, as well as athletic and baseball games, and other tests of endurance and skill. In a multitude of other channels this love for the "life strenuous" is making itself manifest, so that, as a nation, we are rapidly forging to the front as seekers of honest sport. Recognizing this "handwriting on the wall," we have concluded that the time has arrived to give this vast army of young enthusiasts a publication devoted exclusively to invigorating out-door life. We feel we are justified in anticipating a warm response from our sturdy American boys, who are sure to revel in the stirring phases of sport and adventure, through which our characters pass from week to week.

# ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY

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NEW YORK, May 6, 1905.

Price Five Cents.

## Jack Lightfoot's Lucky Puncture;

OR,

### A YOUNG ATHLETE AMONG THE HOBOES.

By MAURICE STEVENS.

#### CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

**Jack Lightfoot**, the best all-round athlete in Cranford or vicinity, a lad clear of eye, clean of speech, and, after he had conquered a few of his faults, possessed of a faculty for *doing things* while others were talking, that by degrees caused him to be looked upon as the natural leader in all the sports Young America delights in—a boy who in learning to conquer himself put the power into his hands to wrest victory from others.

**Tom Lightfoot**, Jack's cousin, and sometimes his rival; though their striving for the mastery was always of the friendly, generous kind. Tom was called the "Book-Worm" by his fellows, on account of his love for studying such secrets of nature as practical observers have discovered and published; so that he possessed a fund of general knowledge calculated to prove useful when his wandefing spirit took him abroad into strange lands.

**Lafe Lampton**, a big, hulking chap, with an ever present craving for something to eat. Lafe always had his appetite along, and proved a staunch friend of our hero through thick and thin.

**Jubal Marlin and Wilson Crane**, two of Jack's companions, and members of the athletic association.

**Barron**, a hobo who runs up against trouble on the day he first meets Jack Lightfoot.

**Kinky**, another one of the tramp gang.

**Mrs. Ransom**, a warmhearted country woman.

**Mary Ellen**, a poor little waif whom Jack befriends.

**Lize**, the pretended mother of Mary Ellen.

#### CHAPTER I.

MARY ELLEN.

"Hello, little girl!"

Jack Lightfoot slowed his wheel. A little girl, whose ragged dress and distressed manner were so out of keeping with her winsome face that his attention had been strongly drawn, was walking along the rough country road.

Jack did not leap down from the bicycle, but gave it a zigzag motion, which enabled him to keep his seat and at the same time accommodated his pace to that of the child.

"Little girls shouldn't be crying on so fine a day as this."

The child turned to him. Her sunny blue eyes had been filled with tears, which she now rubbed away with a chubby, dirty hand.



The front of her tattered dress showed milk stains.

"I—I broke the pitcher," she sobbed, "and spilt the milk!"

"Crying doesn't help it," he urged.

This made her sob again.

"I shouldn't cry about it."

"But I broke the pitcher and lost the milk!"

She rubbed her eyes again.

"How did you happen to break the pitcher?"

"Lize sent me to get milk, and I stumbled and fell, and the pitcher broke, and the milk is all spilt out."

She looked at the front of her short dress, and brushed at it with her soiled hand.

"There are plenty more pitchers, and more milk."

She did not answer.

"Do you live near here?"

"Right down there," she said, pointing. "And—and I'm—I'm afraid to go home!"

She sobbed, convulsively.

"Afraid to go home?"

"Lize'll beat me, be-because I br-broke the pitcher!"

"Oh, I don't think it will be as bad as that! I wouldn't cry about it. How much milk did you have?"

"A—a pint."

"Where did you get it?"

"From Ransom's."

"Is that the farmhouse back there?"

She did not answer, but he knew he had guessed right, for she had been coming from that direction.

It was a lonely country place, with few houses, some miles out from Cranford, on the road between Cranford and the manufacturing city of Cardiff. Jack had left Cranford in the morning and ridden to Cardiff, where he had some acquaintances, and there had found things so pleasant that he had started late on his return journey, and was still a long way from home, with night at hand. The sun had already set.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, little girl. If you'll get up here on my wheel we'll ride back to Ransom's and get another pint of milk. I can go fast on this wheel, and you won't miss hardly any time in getting home."

"But I—I haven't got any p-pitcher!" sobbed the child.

"We can get something at Ransom's to put the milk in; perhaps another pitcher."

"Oh, I'm afraid to—to go home, 'cause Lize will beat me!"

"Well, if we get some more milk, and perhaps another pitcher, there won't be any trouble about it, I think."

She stood in the road, crying and digging the toe of her ragged shoe into the dirt, while Jack sat on his wheel with his hand on the fence.

"What do you say?" he asked, in a gay tone. "That will be just the thing, and if we hurry we can be back here almost before you could say Jack Robinson. We can go awfully fast on this bicycle. You aren't afraid to ride on it, are you? I'll hold you."

She continued to cry, digging her toe into the dirt. Jack leaped down.

"Come now," he urged; "we'll go right back and get that milk. Don't you think you'd like to?"

She hesitated.

"Is Lize your mother?" he asked.

"She—she says she is; but she ain't."

"Well, she won't be angry, I'm sure, if we get more milk."

The girl looked at him steadily, almost unwinkingly. Her face was dirty, apparently because she had been rubbing at the tears with a very dirty hand; but Jack could see that it was a beautiful face, and the blue eyes showed intelligence.

"She—she beats me; and she'll beat me again!"

"I'll explain how it was," he said, "and then she won't."

"But the milk costs a lot of money. I paid three cents for the milk, and Lize says three cents is a lot of money, and I haven't any money n-now."

Jack took some small coins out of his pocket.

"I'll pay for it. See! I've got plenty of money; you don't know how rich I am. There's enough to buy the milk, and the pitcher, too, if Ransom will sell us a pitcher. Maybe we can get one just like the one you broke."

The child brightened.

Jack saw assent in her eyes, and, catching her up, he deposited her on the wheel, telling her how to hold



on. Then he mounted, with the child in front of him, and sped with her swiftly back to Ransom's.

Mrs. Ransom, who came to the door, was a motherly looking woman, who seemed much surprised when she saw the little girl and Jack.

"Why, Mary Ellen, that's as good as riding in a carriage, ain't it?" she cried, cheerfully.

"Better," said Mary Ellen, her blue eyes shining with childish delight.

"We came to see if we could buy a pitcher just like the one she had, and get another pint of milk," said Jack. "She fell and broke the pitcher, as she was going home."

Mrs. Ransom looked at him questioningly.

"You aren't related to—to the Barron's?"

"Never heard of them," said Jack.

At the mention of the name, Mary Ellen began to tremble again.

Seeing this, the woman assured her that she could get a pitcher for her, and could give her another pint of milk.

Jack had dismounted, with Mary Ellen, from the wheel.

"If you could get a pitcher just like the one she had," he said, and he took out the coins he had showed to Mary Ellen.

"I'll see what I've got," answered the woman, and went into the house.

Jack looked about the yard. There were old-fashioned flower beds, with tall lilac bushes, a climbing rose vine over the door, and at one corner of the house the huge vine of a trumpet flower. Out beyond were some stables and barns, and a carriage shed.

When Mrs. Ransom appeared in the door again she beckoned to Jack, saying at the same time:

"Come in and see if this will do?"

Jack knew this was a subterfuge, for the purpose of getting a word with him which Mary Ellen should not hear, and he entered the house, telling the child he would be out in just a moment.

He saw that Mrs. Ransom looked grave, and even troubled. She had put the small white pitcher down on a table, where she had also a lighted lamp, for the room was growing dark.

"You're a stranger here?" she said, looking at Jack, and pushing back a stray coil of hair that dropped down over an ear.

"I live in Cranford," said Jack.

"It's several miles from here."

"Yes; but one can get along pretty fast on a wheel."

"You don't know the Barrons?"

"Never even heard the name before."

"That's what I thought. They live in that old house down the road, and every day or two they send Mary Ellen up here to get something. They gin'erly pay for the milk, but other things they don't. They're the greatest borrowers I ever seen. But that ain't what I want to say. They're a bad lot—about as bad as tramps, if they ain't tramps themselves. I hope you won't have any trouble with 'em. No, I won't charge anything for the milk."

Jack had taken out the coins to pay her.

"I'll pay for the pitcher."

She shook her head.

"Let it go; 'tain't worth much, but it's as good as the one she broke. I suppose you saw Mary Ellen cryin', after she'd broke the pitcher?"

"Yes."

"Them Barrons air terrible people; the way they whip that child is simply scandalous. If I wasn't a widder woman myself I'd do somethin' to stop it, but they'd burn the house over my head, if I did."

Jack was almost startled by this vivid picture of the character of the Barrons.

"Is this their child?"

"Their child? That handsome little thing they'r'n! I don't believe it; though that's what they claim. But Mary Ellen told me one day that she wasn't their child. And they treat her worse than I'd treat a dog. So 'Im glad to let you have the milk and the pitcher, on that account."

"But you're robbing yourself! Let me pay for them."

"I'm willin' to do that much for Mary Ellen. But don't git into any quarrel with the Barrons, when you go there. It might be better for you to say that I thought of sending a new pitcher and more milk, and



that I asked you to take Mary Ellen on your bicycle, so that she could git home quicker."

"Thank you for the pitcher and milk," said Jack, backing through the door with the pitcher in his hands. "And I'll remember what you've told me."

## CHAPTER II.

### MARY ELLEN'S STORY.

As Jack Lightfoot sped with Mary Ellen along the country road in the gathering dusk he tried to draw her out.

She was more cheerful, because she hoped that the new pitcher and the milk would avert the beating she had feared.

"How long have you lived with Mrs. Barron?" he asked.

"Oh, a long time!"

"Did you always live here?"

"In that house? Oh, no!"

"In this part of the country?"

"I used to live in the city," she declared, brightening still more with that memory; "and I had a little dolly, and a little doggie, and my pa used to take me out in his carriage to drive in the park with mamma."

This was most surprising information, and it suggested such possibilities that Jack sought for more.

Mary Ellen became silent, with a new fear, when he questioned again.

"But I mustn't tell anything!"

"Why not?"

"You won't tell, will you, what I said about the dolly, and the doggie, and—and——"

"Not a word," said Jack.

"'Cause if you do Lize'll beat me; she said she'd knock my head off if I ever told. She beat me one day for talkin' to Mrs. Ransom 'bout it."

"She won't know that you've said anything to me, for I will not say a word about it."

She snuggled close against Jack's breast, as if that gave her assurance and comfort.

"I—I like you," she admitted, timidly.

"That's good; and I like you."

"And I like to ride this way; it's lots of fun. We go so fast that it makes the wind blow in my face."

"What was the name of the city where you used to live?"

"It was New York; but Lize and Dan says it was no such thing."

"Who's Dan?"

"Dan is Lize's 'Old Man'; that's what she calls him."

She pressed still harder against Jack.

"Oh, sometimes he's worsen than Lize; he hollers at me, 'specially when he's been drinkin'. And then his breath smells, oh, just horrid! Did you ever see anybody when they'd been drinkin'? They're just offul; they'll hit you with a stick, if you don't get out of the way. Dan hit me once."

Though she was holding the pitcher, she tried to slip up her sleeve, to show the mark of the blow, but could not.

"It's there on my arm now, a great, big, black spot, where he hit me; he was drinkin', and he throwed a stick of stove wood at me. Sometimes he throws things at Lize; and then they have fights like everything. One time when they was fightin' he fell down, and then she pounded him offul with the poker. Sometimes they have fights with the men that come?"

"What do you do when they fight?"

"That time I climbed up the ladder and hid in the loft; but there's a crack there—it's that wide—and you can see through it! And Dan he hollered turrible, when Lize was hittin' him with the poker. And I was scared, and they didn't know I was lookin'. But you can see good, through that hole; only it's dark up there in the loft. Lize shuts me up there when I cry too loud; that's when she's been beatin' me, and people are passin' on the road and she don't want 'em to hear me cryin'. She says it will make 'em mad at me; and so she shuts me up there; and it's just offul dark, and I'm scared. Say, do you know, there's rats there! Yes, sir; great, big, black rats; and they run round and squeal like anything."

"What was your name, when you lived in New York?"

"Lize says it wasn't New York."

"What was your name before you lived with Lize?"

"My name then was Mary Ellen Traverse; but it's



Mary Ellen Barron now. They've 'dopted me, 'cause I ain't got any home; and Lize she says that she's goin' to be a mother to me, and train me up to earn money. She says that I can earn a whole lot of money—most a handful every day."

Jack had seldom been so deeply interested in a story as in this naïve narrative, given in answer to his persistent questioning.

The house of the Barrons was now near at hand, and he must finish his questions quickly.

"How are you going to earn this money?"

"Beg."

"Beg?"

"Um-huh! That's what Lize says. She says the gentlemen and ladies in the city will give a little girl like me whole lots of money just for beggin'. And then she's goin' to buy me a dolly with it, and a little doggie, and maybe a pony; and I'm to have a little gold locket with a chain, and a red coral ring, like Mrs. Hazard's little girl's got."

"Who's Mrs. Hazard?"

"Oh, how funny! You don't know anybody round here! She lives at the next farm, but it's an offul long ways. I ain't ever been down there but once, and that was when I run away. Lize come after me, and then I got an offul beain'. And I got shut up in the loft all night."

Then she saw the ramshackle, old house which was now her home, and straightway the dreams she had been indulging in came tumbling to the ground; for out in the yard she saw Lize, an ungainly, rawboned woman, with a vicious face and a shock of coarse hair.

Jack felt the little form trembling.

"You—you won't—won't tell!" she begged, in a frightened voice. "We haven't spilt any of the milk, have we? That cloth tied over the pitcher is wet, but the milk didn't run out any, did it?"

"Not a drop ran out!" said Jack.

"And—and you won't tell what I—I said? It was wicked; Lize says it's wicked to tell things, and the devil gets people who tell. So you won't tell, either."

She was trembling so violently that Jack took the pitcher from her hands, as they turned in at the house, where Lize was standing in the grassless yard.

The woman was dark-faced, either from smoke and dirt or because of a natural complexion, Jack did not know which. But he knew that she was a vicious-looking creature, and he trembled, himself, for what might befall this helpless, little girl whenever Lize had her way with her.

### CHAPTER III.

#### JACK CHIPS IN.

When Jack slipped from his wheel, assisting Mary Ellen down, the dark-faced woman tried to smooth the wrinkles of anger from her unprepossessing countenance. She was crafty, and her words brought to Jack the shock of a surprise.

Instead of being harsh and threatening, they were wheedling in tone.

"Sweetest, why was you gone so long?" she asked, addressing the trembling child.

"She's offler, when she's that way," Mary Ellen whispered to Jack, and her little hand sought his as if for protection.

Twilight though the time was, Jack could see plainly the look of fear on Mary Ellen's face.

He closed his hand tightly on hers, to comfort and reassure her.

"You met a nice, young gent by the way, did ye?—and he give ye a lift?"

"Th-the pit-pitcher felled and broke," Mary Ellen stammered, "and——"

"And we went back and got some more milk, and another pitcher," said Jack.

The woman's countenance, which had clouded when she heard the words of the child, cleared again, as Jack spoke.

"It was offly good o' you, I'm sure, to want to help a pore, little child that is the sunshine and light of her mother's heart. Come here, sweetest."

When Mary Ellen hesitated and trembled, the woman spoke again, in that sugary, wheedling way.

"She ain't used t' ridin' on a masheen, ye see; and it's frightened her, the pore dear!"

She put out her hands in a coaxing manner.

"Come, tell me how you happened to meet the nice,



young gent, dearest. And what did Mrs. Ransom say about ye breakin' the pitcher?"

Mary Ellen clung to Jack's strong hand until the last moment, then dropped it reluctantly and went over to the crouching woman.

"Mrs. Ransom said she wouldn't charge anything for the extra milk, nor for the pitcher," said Jack. "I explained to her that it was altogether an accident, and she said she wouldn't charge anything, because of that."

"She's an angel, that's what she is; ain't she, Mary Ellen? Now we'll go into the house. And we thank the young gent most kindly, fer the nice ride he give ye."

She took the pitcher which Jack extended to her.

Then he made a surprising request. He asked Mrs. Barron if he might remain there all night.

"It's some distance to Cranford," he explained, "and I've already ridden a long ways. I can sleep on the floor, and almost anything to eat will do me."

A suspicious light came into the dark eyes of the woman.

She looked him full in the face, for the first time, and that look was one of questioning, almost of fear. Then her eyes dropped.

"We're only pore folks, with scursely a bed in the house, and hardly a bite that would be fittin' fer ye, so we couldn't do it; though we does thank ye fer bein' so kind to little Mary Ellen. Don't we, Mary Ellen? Tell the kind young gentleman that we thanks him very much."

"Thank you very much!" said Mary Ellen, her voice fluttering in a way that went straight to Jack Lightfoot's tender heart.

A heavy step was heard.

Mary Ellen shrank behind the ragged dress of the woman.

And then Jack saw a man, as evil of face as the woman, walking from the road into the grassless yard.

His attire was little better, if any, than that of a tramp. One eye was gone, and the scar of the wound that had doubtless slashed that eye out ran as a fiery streak from his red, shaggy beard up to his dusty, red

hair. The part of his face free of beard was marked with smallpox. He shambled as he walked.

Little wonder, Jack thought, that Mary Ellen shrank behind the dress of the woman she feared, for this man was undoubtedly more of a brute even than the woman.

"My husband," said the woman, ducking in a clumsy bow, as the man came toward Jack. "This is a kind young gent that give Mary Ellen a nice ride on his masheen. Didn't he, Mary Ellen?"

"Howdy do!" the man grunted.

"Pleased to meet you," said Jack, though he wasn't. "I suppose you couldn't let me stop over with you to-night." Your wife says you haven't much room, but I could bunk down anywhere."

"No room fer th' likes o' you!" the man grumbled. "So, go 'long wit' youse! Dis ain't a boardin' house."

The woman was retreating toward the open door, dragging Mary Ellen with her.

The man turned toward the doorway.

Sick at heart, and puzzled as to his proper course of action, Jack threw his wheel around.

The next moment he was mounted and riding on.

But he did not go far.

The trembling, and the look of fear, of Mary Ellen, tugged at his heartstrings.

When he had ridden far enough for the gathering darkness to hide him he stopped, and, dismounting, stood in the road, considering what he ought to do.

Then he walked back slowly along the road, trundling his wheel at his side.

As he drew near the house, still screened by a growth of trees from the view of anyone there, he heard a childish scream of pain and fear.

It came in the voice of Mary Ellen.

"Oh, don't, don't!"

Jack's heart leaped with indignation. He sprang upon his wheel.

As he sent it along, those pitiful cries continued to reach him, with loud screams of pain and fear; and then he heard the strokes of a lash.

His wheel fairly jumped along the road, and in a few moments he was again in the grassless yard.

"You telltale brat, I'll kill you! Do ye hear? Stop



that cryin', now! Stop it, er I'll murder you right here!"

It was the voice of the female termagant and tyrant.

Then the man's voice came:

"Let me git at her; I'll l'arn youse somethin', kid! You ever goin' to talk t' strangers ag'in?"

"No, no!" the child wailed.

"Don't try ter break away from me—don't you try it, you——"

The lash fell, and the child screamed.

Jack could not stand any more of it. He rushed to the door, leaving his wheel lying on the ground. From only one dirty window light shone; the rest of the house was in darkness. It was from the room where this faint light oozed out that the sounds came, and it was to this quarter Jack ran.

He set his hand to the knob, and the door yielding to his hands, he stepped across the threshold.

The woman stood with whip raised, as if to strike the child, and, seeing him, she turned on him with blazing eyes.

The man leaped to his feet with an oath.

The child screamed again, and now tried to break away from the woman.

She was thrown back and fell to the floor, and then both the man and the woman faced Jack.

"What youse doin' here?" the man demanded.

"I've come to stop that—that brutality!" Jack panted.

"Gwan! Clear out o' here!"

"No," said Jack; "I don't go."

He stepped further into the room; but he left the door open behind him.

"You have no right to beat that child."

"She's a lyin' little devil," said the woman, "and we didn't punish her more'n she deserved."

She seemed about to fly at Jack like a cat or a tigress; but again her craftiness came uppermost.

"It was about the milk," she explained. "She lied to you, and that's why I was punishin' her; I don't let her tell stories to nobody. She said she broke the pitcher; but she drunk the milk all up first, and then broke the pitcher purposely; and then she tole ye that lie, to git you to help her out of it. She was cryin'

when you come on her, 'cause she knowed she'd done wrong. Ain't that so, Mary Ellen?"

Mary Ellen was sobbing bitterly, and did not answer.

"Speak up an' tell the nice, young gent that it's so!" said the woman.

But Mary Ellen, much as she feared the woman, did not speak up.

The man advanced, belligerently.

"Now, youse clear out o' dis!" he shouted. "I ain' goin' to have my private bizness interfered wit' by youse. You git out t'rough de hole youse come in at er I'll t'row you out."

Jack maintained his ground. He had not the bulk nor the strength of this trampish-looking man, but he was not afraid of him. In fact, just then, and in the mood that possessed him, Jack Lightfoot would not have been afraid of anybody.

His face was flushed, his manner agitated, and his gray-blue eyes shone with a steely glitter; yet he had not personal fear.

"You can't make me go," he said; and he said it in a way to give the trampish coward thought. "I heard the child scream, and so I came back. And now I say to you that you must not touch her again."

The man hesitated, his face working with passion. His one sinister eye, and that red scar reaching from his red beard up to his dusty, red hair, made him look like a dangerous character, which, no doubt, he was.

"We don't punish Mary Ellen on'y when it's necessary," purred the woman, in a voice that she meant to be soft and winning, but which Jack likened to the purr of a tigress. "Children has to be punished if they tells lies; and she lied about the milk."

The voice of the woman seemed to stiffen the man's courage, and, besides, he saw but a boy before him, a good, stout youth, tall and extremely lithe-looking, but still, as he fancied, only a big boy.

And thus thinking, he rushed at Jack.

"You'll git out o' my house, or I t'rows you out!"

Smack!

Jack's hard, tanned fist shot out, and the man tumbled backward.



He struck the floor so heavily that his fall jarred the little house.

That blow and fall caused the woman to abandon her wheedling tones. The tigress purr vanished, to be replaced by the tigress scream of rage.

She caught a knife from a shelf and made at Jack.

"Don't try to strike me with that!" Jack warned; and when she came on fierce as a panther, he threw up one foot, in a short, quick kick, and sent the knife spinning across the floor.

The woman fell back, for Jack's toe had struck her fingers, as well as the knife, and for a moment she thought her hand was broken.

The man scrambled to his feet, dogged and cursing.

"I'll kill you for this!" he threatened. "Do you think youse can come inter de house of a peaceable citerzen and do like dis? Nit!"

"Now, see here," said Jack, who feared he was not helping along the cause of Mary Ellen.

"See here? Wot is it? All I want out o' youse is ter walk! See?"

"I see, and I shall obey you, when I get ready. This is what I want to say to you: There are laws in this country, to protect unfortunate children that fall into the hands of such people as you."

"Fall inter the hands of?" screamed the woman.

"That's what I said."

"She's my own child!"

"There are laws to protect children from the cruelty of even their own parents, when those parents happen to be brutes. There is a town about four miles from here—the town of Highland. You know where it is—off on the right here. I'm going to ride to that town as fast as my bicycle can take me, and I shall bring officers out here who will see that this child, even if she is yours, has proper protection. Now, that's my say."

He turned as if to leave, then stopped in hesitation. He wanted to take Mary Ellen with him, and would have done so if it had been possible without a terrible fight.

It seemed best for himself, and best for Mary Ellen, that such a fight should be avoided. He might be in-

jured, even killed; and then he could not help the child who so plainly needed assistance.

"I want you to understand, last of all," he said, speaking again, "that if you beat Mary Ellen while I'm gone it will be made known, and your punishment will be so much the worse."

"You goin' to take her away from us?" screamed the woman.

"Either that, or you'll have to give bonds to treat her right. There was a case of a little girl like this in Cranford, some time ago, and the people had to give bonds to treat her well. I know what I'm talking about."

He moved toward the door.

The man seemed about to advance on him again, but hesitated, remembering the power of that youthful fist. That blow had been both a revelation and an educator of the most practical sort.

Nevertheless, the man could not help shouting:

"I'll kill youse fer dis! If youse goes to dat town and puts de cops after me, to pinch me, den I gits even wid youse, if it takes ferever."

Jack stepped through the doorway, after flinging back this threat:

"Remember what I said about your beating that child! If you touch her again it will be worse for you. I shall send here the first men I meet, and tell them what you're doing, and then I shall have the officers out here."

He moved out into the yard, toward his bicycle.

Mary Ellen had not said a word.

Deadly fear had paralyzed her.

## CHAPTER IV.

### HESITATION.

The door closed behind Jack with an angry slam.

He stood in the yard, listening, sorely troubled lest he had made matters worse for Mary Ellen.

"Yet they couldn't have been much worse, unless they killed her outright!" was his conclusion.

He feared to leave the house. The anger that had shaken him like a gust of wind, the red-hot rage that had hurled him into the house and made him threaten



these fiends with the law had passed in a measure, so that he was able to take a saner view of the whole matter.

He was still resolved to protect Mary Ellen, at the risk of his life, if necessary; but the manner in which he ought to proceed troubled him.

He did not know what to do. He had said that he would hasten to Highland and return with officers. But if he departed from the house he might let loose against Mary Ellen once more the relentless brutality of this man and woman, who were not her parents, not related to her in any way, but who, as her words had convinced him, had stolen her away from her city home and were drilling her for their use in begging.

They were cowing her with beatings, trying to crush all her spirit of resistance or complaint, so that when they went out with her she would be but a pliant tool in their hands, with which they could coax money from the public.

Jack believed now that they were in this place but temporarily. It was not their proper or congenial habitation. They were not country people. It seemed to him more than likely that they were for a period in hiding here, because they were wanted elsewhere for some crime. And while they were thus keeping out of the clutches of the law, they were bending Mary Ellen to their will and breaking her with many and cruel punishments.

It was, to Jack's mind, clearly a case where the law ought to interfere. That these people were strangers in the neighborhood had been proven by the words of Mrs. Ransom, and her words had shown also that she feared them and could not be depended on to do anything, even though she pitied the hard lot of the child.

No sounds except low-muttered words came now from the house; but the light still shone from the dirty window.

The words Jack could not understand; but, at any rate, Mary Ellen was not crying. She was probably too frightened to make a sound. Yet her silence told him they were not beating her again.

Jack moved on out into the yard and picked up his wheel, which he pushed along out to the road.

• He stood there a while, in the thickening darkness, looking at the house and listening.

Mounting his wheel, Jack rode slowly along the road in the direction of Highland, hesitating still as to what he should do.

He would have ridden swiftly toward Highland if he had not been afraid to trust Mary Ellen to the mercies of those demons.

Yet, apparently, the bitter punishment to which she had been that evening subjected was nothing new. The way in which she had trembled as she came home with him told him that.

Jack did not ride far.

He stopped his wheel again, and then, after another period of thought, he returned toward the house.

"I can make that complaint to the officers to-morrow, as well as to-night—better than to-night, for it will be late before I could get anyone out here. That's what I'll do—make the complaint to-morrow; and to-night I'll stay right here."

He did not approach too near the house; but, climbing the broken fence, he lifted his wheel over into the field and then sat down in the fence corner, thinking over the situation and listening for some sounds from the house.

After a long time, when no sounds came, he moved nearer the house.

Pitch darkness had now come, so that even the house was invisible, but the darkness could not hinder the passage of sounds, and he was resolved to go to Mary Ellen's aid if anything indicated that she was being again punished.

Jack had eaten no supper; and being a normal, healthy fellow, he felt very hungry.

"I can stick it out till morning," he said, resolutely.

When the silence continued he moved with his wheel still nearer to the house.

By and by he circled it, and came to the barn out beyond.

In this barn he discovered that a horse was kept, for he could hear it moving restlessly in its stall.

The barn was much larger than the house, but it was an old tumble-down affair, with broken roof and generally disreputable appearance, as ill-looking in its



way as the man and the woman in the house. Behind it, and close up against it, was a high, rocky hill, a part of a range of hills beginning here.

Jack thought once of going into the barn and lying down on the hay, but that would have made it harder for him to hear any sounds coming from the house.

"They'll be surprised if they do begin on that child again, and I pop in on them," was his thought.

He almost chuckled.

Yet he was troubled.

He had done the only thing that seemed possible to do, yet he was not at all sure that he had bettered Mary Ellen's position, or that he could really accomplish anything in Highland. The people of Highland, even the officials, might not be willing to take the matter up.

He had a few acquaintances in Highland, chiefly among the baseball boys; but those Highland baseball boys were not likely to pay much attention to him, for they had not shown a very good spirit toward him when Cranford played Highland, at which time he was pitcher for the latter nine. There had been trouble between his team and the Highland nine, and some things had happened that would not make the baseball boys think too kindly of him now.

As nothing opened, except to camp down somewhere near the Barrons' home and keep a watch for a while, this is what Jack did, putting his back against a tree, with his wheel at his side.

He meant to keep wide awake, and he did for some time; but he had ridden hard that day, and now, with the subsidence of his anger, there had come a reaction, which, adding its weight to his weariness, soon made him sleepy.

Stoutly resolving to remain awake the first half of the night, anyway, he fell asleep, with his back against the tree.

Then he was awakened, well on toward morning, it seemed to him, by a scream of terror from the horse in the barn, and by a flash of fire.

The barn was in flames.

## CHAPTER V.

### HEROISM.

The frightened horse was plunging in its stall, as Jack Lightfoot ran toward the barn. The glare of the fire illumined the night and made the old house stand out plainly.

Jack was startled by the suddenness with which he had been aroused, and by the sight of the fire and the almost human scream of the scared horse; yet, even then, he had time to note the strange silence which lay on the house, and to wonder why none of the inmates appeared.

He had no time to investigate this; but, going to the barn door on that side, he threw it open.

The interior was flaming like a furnace.

The fire had apparently started in the haymow, for it was chiefly in the upper portion; but strands of burning hay were dropping down everywhere, igniting whatever they touched.

The hay in the horse's manger was flaming, and the horse was surging back on the rope that held it there, trying to break away. The rope went round its neck and an end was tied to the manger, so that the doom of the animal was sealed if no help came to it.

Disregarding the element of personal peril, Jack ran on into the barn and the stall. He laid his hand on the flank of the horse, and with a stroke tried to soothe it; but the brute was wild with fear and was leaping and snorting.

A gust of air blew the flames of the burning manger into its face, and with another startled scream it threw itself back, choking itself with the halter and falling down in the stall.

Jack slipped over it, as it lay struggling and writhing, and tried to get at the halter, which was now stretched taut.

The flame from the burning hay blew toward him, and he could only reach the halter and at the same time save his eyes by bending far over and stretching out his hand. He held his knife in his hand and was about to slice at the rope, when the floundering horse all but threw him.

"Steady!" he called. "Whoa, there, steady! I'll have you out of this in a jiffy!"



The horse threshed and trembled, and swinging its head back and forth, beat its head against the wall of the stall.

Jack felt the heat scorching his face, but he hacked resolutely at the rope, and felt it part under the strokes of his knife.

The parting of the rope threw the horse back, for it had been pulling on it, and this movement seemed to wedge it more tightly in the stall.

Jack now tried to get the scared animal upon its feet.

It was so stricken with terror that it refused to rise, but lay there trembling and threshing about.

Then Jack did the only thing possible. He took off his coat and wrapped it about the horse's head, thus covering its eyes and so shutting from it the sight of the fire.

With a staggering surge the horse now gained its feet, and by jerking on the rope Jack backed it out of the stall.

But new difficulties were in the way. The burning hay wisps which dropped from above had ignited the bedding of straw, and also had ignited a lot of hay near the door, which had been thrown from above, for feeding purposes. This flashed now and roared upward, putting a wall of flame between him and the only way of escape.

Securing the coat about the horse's head—for he knew if it came away and gave the horse a view of that fire in front the beast would become unmanageable—Jack seized a pitchfork and began to throw the burning hay to one side, out of the way, trying to clear a passage to the door.

He worked like a Trojan. Strands and wisps of burning hay fell over him, and once a cinder burned through his shirt and blistered his arm. He slapped it out and continued to prod frantically at the hay until a way was partly cleared.

But the fire was everywhere gaining. The blinded horse stood trembling, crouching low in fear, ready, apparently, to leap about and make Jack's task more trying.

The whole interior of the barn, especially the upper portion, was now a roaring furnace, and the fire break-

ing through the roof flashed its light against the black sky.

Jack saw that he had no time to lose, for at that instant a burned-off support of the roof broke away and tumbled down in the center of the barn floor, sending up a shower of sparks that flew about like red rain.

With a leap Jack gained the head of the horse. He patted the animal and spoke to it, though his words were almost drowned in that angry roar of the fire. Then, having somewhat soothed the animal, Jack slapped it briskly and led it at a trot toward the door.

It flinched, and for a moment he thought all was lost, as it felt the heat of the fire in the burning hay, which he had tossed aside; but he yelled at it, struck it again and it plunged blindly through the doorway.

Jack stumbled through after it, feeling that his face was cooked; then he snatched the blinding coat from its head and saw it start off with wild snorts of terror, holding its head high and trotting out into the road.

Still, no one had come from the house.

The fire was now a towering, red pinnacle streaming up through the broken roof of the barn, fed by the hay and flinging itself on high like a torn and bloody banner.

It seemed to create upward-rising air currents which sucked the burning hay skyward, shooting flaming wisps into the upper blackness as lava stones are hurled up by a volcano.

The effect was spectacular, and it was frightful.

Jack was sure there was no other animal in the doomed barn. He believed he would have heard it if one were there, and he had heard nothing. He turned again toward the silent house, his heart filled with questioning.

What had become of the Barrons and Mary Ellen?

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## CHAPTER VI.

### IN A TRAP.

As Jack was debating this and about to proceed to the house to investigate the strange silence which wrapped it, he heard what he believed to be a human voice in the burning barn.

He had put on his coat. He had discovered, too,



that though the heat had made his face smart, he was not burned, except where the spark had eaten through his shirt and touched his arm.

Jack Lightfoot's unselfish heroism came uppermost, as he heard that seemingly human cry from the interior of the barn. He turned to the barn door, which stood open, and through which he could see the leaping fire within.

Then he heard the sound again.

"Something is in there!" he said.

Whether man or animal, the thought that the fire threatened his life could not hold Jack from entering now.

He drew up the collar of his coat, pulled his cap well down over his eyes, and entering the stable, began to grope through the heat and smoke behind the stalls, in the direction from which the sound appeared to have come.

It was courting death, for now the rafters of the barn were all on fire and the whole barn roof was likely to tumble down in a blazing heap at any moment.

Jack did not hear the sound again; yet he stumbled on, choked and blinded by the thick smoke and the heat.

Then something gave way beneath his feet and he felt himself falling.

At the same instant he heard a terrifying crashing and cracking combined, with a roar that told him the roof was dropping in.

He had no time for thought, as he plunged downward.

Then he struck feet foremost in water, which reached only to his knees, and he was sure he had fallen into an old well in the barn.

The roar of the falling roof continued, ending in a resounding crash that shook the very walls of the well about him.

Stunned and scared, he put out his hands, and they touched a stone curbing. Above him was blackness, flecked by fire.

Then the cool air in the well became choked, as the heat of the burning timbers above him began to make its way down to where he stood, dazed, stunned and frightened.

As he crouched thus, trembling and wondering what next, and with a thought that this was the end for him, he heard a voice.

It sounded husky and far away, but it reached him clearly:

"Dis way!" it whispered.

It seemed to come from the water at his feet.

Though sure this could not be, Jack stooped and felt in the water with his hands, for the well was large and he could turn readily.

"Come while youse kin!" said the voice, still seeming to come from the water.

As Jack stooped, thus putting his head down, the next words seemed shot into his ear, as through a tube; and this is what he heard:

"Gee, fellers, I guesses we'd better hike; de smoke's workin' in dis way to beat de band!"

Then Jack, putting out his hand, discovered here a hole leading from the well, apparently into the very earth itself.

It was an astonishing discovery.

Some timbers which had fallen flat across the mouth of the old well, thus keeping the fire and the burning splinters from reaching him, now sprang into a blaze, making a fiery light over his head and showering him with sparks.

These sparks fell into the water with a hissing sound and were extinguished, but others rained down upon him.

Without taking time to consider what this might lead to, Jack drew himself up into the hole to get away from that rain of fire, and found himself in a timbered tunnel three or four feet in diameter.

He could not stand upright in it, but he could move along in a crouching position, and this is what he did until he bumped against a man.

"You're de last one, air ye?" said this man.

Jack trembled. The knowledge that he was probably in as great danger as that from which he had escaped, and the thought that this was probably Barron himself, made Jack cautious. At the same time, he was puzzled by the man's words; for they told him that others were in there somewhere. Probably, he



thought, these others were Mrs. Barron and Mary Ellen.

What were they doing in there? and had they fired the barn? And if so, why?

Jack answered the man's question, but with a thickened utterance that made his words almost indistinguishable.

"What's de matter wit' youse?" the man demanded.

"Mouth's hurt," said Jack, still disguising his voice.

"Gee! How'd dat happen?"

Jack did not know what to say, so he said:

"I dunno."

"Well, de ole barn is makin' fireworks fer de neighborhood, all right!"

He turned his head; then shouted:

"Air youse all right? Better skin out o' dis, hadn't we? Dere's goin' ter be somethin' doin' round here mighty quick, I'm guessin', and we'd better slide."

Words came to Jack's ears from beyond this man; but he could not understand them, for even in that subterranean place the roar of the fire, combined with the thunder of falling timbers, was deafening.

But he felt the man move along, and, not knowing what to do, he moved along, too.

Yet, one thing had been made clear.

This man was not Barron, and the others were not Mrs. Barron and Mary Ellen. Choked and indistinguishable as the words were, the voices had told him that.

The narrow tunnel was oppressively hot and stuffy, and now and then, when there seemed to be a suction of air through it, Jack seemed to be breathing flames.

He wondered who these men were and what had become of the Barrons and Mary Ellen.

The only supposition concerning these men he could fix on was that they were tramps who had been spending the night in the barn, and while thus occupying it had accidentally set it on fire.

But no sooner had he fixed on this theory than he heard something else, a mention of Barron's name.

Then he heard talk that was very puzzling.

The men had reached a larger chamber, apparently, and Jack, standing up, found that he had plenty of room about him.

Then a light flashed, which Jack at first thought was a flash of the fire from the burning barn, but which he saw instantly was a match.

Fearing discovery, he drew back toward the tunnel which yawned behind him, and crouched there, drawing his cap over his eyes.

The match sputtered and went out, as the man who held it tried to light a candle.

But that momentary gleam had shown Jack a room, with bracing timbers, some benches and queer-looking machinery, with three men standing by the table which held the lamp.

The men seemed to be tramps.

"Oh, chee! Got anodder match, Kinky?"

"Let de glim go. Wese ain't got no time ter lose."

"Well, we wants ter take de swag wit' us, see!"

"An' de plates."

"Well, here's ever't'ing, right here."

"Smiley, kerry dis plate."

Jack was addressed, and he dared not hang back.

He shuffled forward in the darkness, holding out his hand, wondering what he was to be given.

The thing pushed to him was of metal, and heavy; but he clutched it.

"Got it?"

"Yes."

"Chee, yer must er burnt yer mout' good, de way youse says dat! But we ain't got no time ter doctor it in here. Take dis; it's your share, mebbe; anyways, hang on ter it till we gits ter de Painted Cave."

How Jack's heart jumped when he heard that name. The Painted Cave!

He knew it well, the cave beyond Eagle Hill, out some distance from Cranford, land marked by three Lombardy poplars, a place where Cranford people went picnicking occasionally.

Jack had been held in that cave once by tramps, and he came to the conclusion now that these were the tramps who had held him.

The thought was queer enough and suggestive enough to make his head whirl.

The thing which the man had given him last seemed to be a roll of paper, which Jack tucked now into his pocket.



The men were leaving; and as there seemed nothing else to do, Jack moved along after them.

He said nothing, while they talked incessantly. The roar of the falling timbers and of the fire kept him from understanding much, but he heard a few words—"plates," "swag," "the goods," and the like. All of it was Greek to him.

Then, suddenly, the men came to a door, against which Jack would have bumped in the darkness. The darkness was now deep about him; but even here the heat and the smell of fire penetrated, though the noise had subsided.

Jack was ready to turn about and plunge headlong into the darkness behind him, no matter where it led, if discovery came; but the men did not yet suspect that he was not one of them.

He wondered whom he was mistaken for.

Later he knew that one of the gang into whose midst he had tumbled had ventured into the barn from the well and had been stricken down by a falling timber. His bones were found in the ashes, after the fire.

Some heavy bolts were slipped, and then Jack saw dimly a dark hole, like the entrance into a mine.

Into this the men walked.

Jack still followed them, but with growing hesitation.

He was wondering what would happen next, and was beginning to think that the peril from the fire could not be much greater than the danger he had stumbled into in escaping from it.

He knew now that the sounds he had heard, which had drawn him that second time into the barn, were made by these men.

Having penetrated to this place, the men began to talk of how they were going to get out safely.

"It'll be daylight soon, and we'll be pinched!" one of them declared.

"Well, wot ye want us to do?" was asked.

"Nuttin' to do, as I can see," said another.

"We kin wait in here till de fire is done wit', an' den make a sneak."

Jack heard a match being scratched.

It flamed into light, and was applied to a greasy

lamp that rested on a niche in the rock wall. The place seemed to be a cave.

Jack had no more than time to make this discovery and to see the darkness of an opening beyond, like that behind him, when one of the men, turning to speak to him, uttered an exclamation.

"Chee, dis ain't——"

The man did not finish the exclamation.

Jack saw that he had been discovered, and he knew that only quick work would save him.

With a jump like a deer he cleared the space between him and that niche, where the lamp flamed, and before the men knew who he was or what he meant to do he had swept the lamp to the stone floor.

There was a crash of breaking glass, a flare of quick flame, and Jack was running right on into the dark passage that opened before him.

The men seemed to be stamping about with howls, but Jack did not even look back. He expected to hear bullets, and felt that his safety depended on his speed.

As he ran he stumbled and fell, which was a lucky thing for him, he discovered; for, as he scrambled up, his hand touched a wall, into which he would have bumped at full speed.

He found now that the passage turned here, and he hurried on again, but not rapidly.

In a minute he heard the men coming in pursuit.

He still held the heavy plate that had been given him. He might use it as a weapon with which to brain one of his pursuers, so he clung to it.

Searching along the wall, hearing that tramp of feet coming, his hands told him that here was another passage, narrower than the first.

He turned into it for safety.

A little later he heard the men rush by, along the larger passage.

Jack knew something of the character of the caves that were scattered at infrequent intervals throughout that region. They were likely to branch and branch again, and lead into such a multiplicity of galleries that there was danger of getting lost in them.

"I'll back-track!" he thought.

It seemed only less perilous than going on; but he feared that if he went on and there was no other



branch to this passage, the tramps would soon hold him up in there, and he would be in a helpless position.

Yet the backward way seemed to offer nothing. The one opening of which he knew was in the old well in the barn. That was choked with fire now, and he could not use it.

Nevertheless, he hastened back as fast as he dared to go, feeling the ground with his feet, until he came to the door which the tramps had opened.

Fortunately they had not locked it, and he passed through without trouble.

Then a bright thought came to him. He remembered that the tramps had removed some bolts in opening this door.

Though he had some matches in his pockets, Jack was afraid to use them, and he began to feel over the surface of the door for the bolts.

He was trembling, and his breath came heavily.

Dropping the plate to the stone floor, as he made this search, he found the bolts, and closing the heavy door of wood, he pushed the bolts into place as well as he could.

They were simply stout, wooden bars, yet they would hold out against a good deal of hammering.

Jack felt easier, having done this.

Now he ventured to strike one of the matches, after listening and becoming certain that the tramps had not returned.

By the light of the match he discovered that the plate was some kind of steel engraving, or a metal plate etched with acids. He was not up in such things, and before he could make much of an examination the match was dying out in his fingers, and he gave his attention to the passage before him.

The match flickered out, expiring with a red end that glowed in the darkness like a little glowing eye.

But Jack had seen the timbered passage which led from the cavern entrance in the direction of the barn.

It was smoke-filled, and the smoke choked him and set him to coughing, but he moved along it.

He knew there was a larger place, a sort of room, and that in it was a candle.

He found the room, and after some search found the candle, which he lighted.

The room was not as large as he had thought; but it was fitted up somewhat like a workshop, and at one side was something that, to his inexperienced eyes, resembled a queer cider press, or the old-fashioned Washington hand press which he had once seen in a country printing office.

While Jack was looking with quick glances at these things, and wondering what to do next, he heard a pounding on the door he had closed and bolted, showing that the tramps had returned, had found it bolted and suspected him of being behind it.

This startled him, and he moved on, bearing the candle, holding it well up that he might see the timbered walls, which pinched together into a narrow passage, where he had to stoop and crouch to pass.

Here the smoke was thicker and the heat became suffocating.

In sheer desperation, Jack was about to turn back. He felt that he should be choked if he stayed there, and he preferred to battle for his life with those tramps.

But before he turned about, to creep back toward the door, he saw a gleam of light.

He thought at first it was the shine of the combustible things that had tumbled, or were tumbling, down into the old well.

Then the light flashed brighter; and the ground in front of him seemed to tumble bodily inward with a cloud of dust and cracking timbers.

As soon as he could see what had happened—all that was visible at first was the glare of a fire and a haze of dust—he rushed forward, for he knew a hole had opened in the earth from above.

Then he heard exclamations and excited voices.

He was close to the opening, when these words reached him:

"By Joshua! my ole wagon broke through there and the hind wheels come nigh droppin' in!"

Then Jack, reaching the hole, where earth and broken timbers lay in a heap, thrust up his head and crawled out of the opening. And the cool night atmosphere, with alternating gusts of hot air from the burning barn, swept across his face.



## CHAPTER VII.

## ACCUSED.

As Jack Lightfoot thus climbed out of the hole, which had been made by the caving in of the tunnel that ran from the old well under the barn to the cavern, and the light of the fire fell upon him, there was an outcry from some men standing near.

They moved toward him in a body, and he saw that they were country people who had probably been drawn there by the sight of the fire.

Jack still clung to the metal plate so strangely given into his keeping, and it was under his arm as he scrambled out.

He was resolved to hang to it until he discovered what it was and meant; for the thought had come to him that it might be a counterfeiter's plate used in making bogus money.

Before Jack could say anything by way of explaining his position, he heard the voice of Barron raised in denunciation of him.

"There he is!" Barron cried. "He's the feller that set the barn on fire!"

Then Barron threw up his hands in amazement, for he saw the plate.

"Wot's he got there?" he demanded.

Jack's quick glance failed to reveal at first the presence of Mary Ellen, or of Mrs. Barron.

The men swarmed round him and their looks were threatening.

"Hold him!" said one of them, as Jack was about to draw back.

"String 'im up!" yelled Barron. "He burned the barn, 'cause he was mad at us; we wouldn't let 'im stay overnight in th' house, and that's why he done it."

"What ye got there, young feller?" said one of the men.

Jack glanced round at the threatening faces.

The barn had fallen in, but the remnants of it were still burning, and the light the fire gave enabled him to see clearly the looks cast on him. They were not reassuring.

"I don't know what it is," he said, resolved to be frank with these men.

One of them held it up, while the others stared at it.

"A counterfeiter's plate!"

Then Barron screamed again:

"I told ye he was a bad un! A counterfeiter, too, is he?"

"I don't know what it is," said Jack, sturdily.

"Oh, ye don't know what it is!" said Barron, in a wolfish voice. "O' course youse don't know what it is. Mebbe you'll say youse didn't burn the barn?"

"I will say it. I had nothing to do with burning the barn."

"Mebbe you'll say that youse didn't burn it jist to spite me an' my ole woman, 'cause we wouldn't give ye lodgin'?"

"I'll say that, too."

The faces of the men were ominous.

One of the men caught Jack roughly by the arm and pulled him forward.

"Go through him!" he cried, speaking to the other man.

"And what's he been doin' hidin' in the groun', an' comin' out that way, as if he was a fox?" screamed Barron.

Jack felt now a thrill of fear, such as he had never felt before. He did not know the nature of the roll he had thrust into his pocket.

He knew soon enough.

The man who searched Jack drew out what seemed to be a roll of greenbacks.

"Aha!" he cried. "Counterfeits, I'll be bound!"

Jack's face grew very red in the firelight, where it was not covered with soot and soil.

"How do you explain this?" the man queried.

"An' ask him where he was hidin'," said Barron.

He came close up to Jack, his eyes flashing, and his fingers working like claws, thrusting his face close up to Jack's.

"What's down there, in that hole you crawled out of?"

"Perhaps you know, I don't," said Jack.

"By cracky! it's a counterfeiter's plate, I believe!"

The men gathered about Jack looked at the plate again.

"Counterfeit, sure as shootin'!"



One of the men dropped into the hole and disappeared from sight.

"A tunnel down here," he called.

"That's where my wagon broke through!"

It was a heavy wagon, as Jack could see, and the tunnel at that point had been weak; but the breaking in of the wall had let Jack out into the open air again. The question with him was, if he had bettered his position.

Jack saw at once the danger into which he had run himself.

These men had found him with a counterfeiter's plate in his possession, and what was apparently counterfeit money in his pocket. He had been caught with "the goods" on him coming out of what he was sure now was a counterfeiters' workshop. Under the circumstances, how could he expect these men to believe anything he might say?

The man who had dropped into the opening shouted up, and curiosity drew other men into the hole until only three remained to hold Jack a prisoner.

Barron had drawn back toward the house, which lay just beyond the barn, and Jack now saw the woman and the child.

Mary Ellen was with Mrs. Barron, and was being dragged along with her.

The firelight on the child's face revealed the terror that was in her heart.

Jack was about to call the men's attention to Mary Ellen, when he recognized the uselessness of it. Whatever he said would not be believed. Mary Ellen would not dare to support his statements.

After a word with the woman Barron returned to where Jack stood, and Jack saw Mary Ellen being led away by the woman she feared, while he stood helpless.

When Barron now began again to accuse Jack, showing that he hoped the young fellow would be maltreated by these men, it seemed to Jack that his position would not be worse if he told just how everything had occurred.

But before he could proceed one of the men who had gone into the hole came tumbling up in great excitement.

"There's a reg'lar counterfeiters' den down there!" he cried, his eyes rolling with excitement; "and some of the counterfeiters is behind a big door! It's bolted on this side, and they're tryin' to git in this way. We're goin' to capture 'em."

"Some o' his pals!" said Barron, pointing to Jack.

But Jack could see that the information given of the men behind that door had terrified Barron.

And that told Jack, what he had already believed, that Barron knew all about that counterfeiters' rendezvous.

Another man tumbled into the hole, and then another, until only one man remained to guard Jack, in addition to Barron.

"By cracky!" said this man, "if there's going to be a fight down there I may be needed!"

"I'll watch him fer youse," said Barron, a wolfish gleam in his eyes.

The man did not hesitate an instant.

"All right," he cried, "don't let him git away; I'm goin' down there."

He dropped into the hole, to go to the aid of his friends, leaving Jack in charge of Barron.

No sooner was the man gone than Barron drew a wicked-looking knife.

"Here's where I finishes you!" he cried, in a totally different tone, and with a different accent. "You'll not live to tell any tales on me."

He came toward Jack, with that knife in his hand, while his scarred and hairy face worked fiendishly.

At the same instant Jack heard a scream from Mary Ellen; and out of the corner of his eye he saw the child, as she was jerked roughly along by the woman.

Jack might have stayed to face the men who had accused him of being a counterfeiter, and he might have stayed to face the fiend who now threatened his life with that knife, even though Mary Ellen's pitiful cry wrung his heart; but the whole situation was given an instant change by howls and cries that now came from the hole, followed by men tumbling up into the firelight.

They were the tramps, who had broken down the door at the cavern entrance, dashed past the men, who



hoped to capture them, and then had made this wild and desperate rush for liberty.

When he saw them, and heard their howls, which told them that the pursuers were right at their heels, Barron dropped his knife hand and joined them as they ran with shambling steps along the base of the rocky hill.

Jack saw that they were going in the direction taken by the woman.

Again he heard a scream from Mary Ellen.

The woman had lost all sense of caution, and had struck the child because she did not move fast enough to please her, and was now beating her because she had cried out.

Mary Ellen's scream of pain and fear, which she tried to subdue, but could not, came to Jack as the call of battle comes to the heart of the soldier.

To obey that call might lead to death.

For an instant Jack hesitated, though not from fear.

Some of the farmers came into view, scrambling out of the hole, and seeing the tramps running, took in pursuit.

Jack was left alone, forgotten for the moment.

Out by the fence, where some one had placed it, he saw his wheel, the red fire light shining on it in a way to make it glitter.

He felt that he could explain everything later, even better than now.

If he remained, the farmers would not believe him. They would take him to town, to Highland, probably; and though he was sure that he could get help from Cranford, which would remove suspicion from him and set him ultimately at liberty, in the meantime Mary Ellen, for whom his whole being cried out, in its desire to aid her, would vanish into the darkness, to which she was being dragged.

When that happened, likely he would never see her again, for it was plain to him that these tramps, as he had considered them, were fleeing as if for their lives, and would not again be seen in that neighborhood. And thus he should lose Mary Ellen, and by so doing no doubt condemn her to a life of which he shuddered to think.

His mind acted quickly.

He had seen Mary Ellen clinging to the woman who was beating her, and he still heard her unheeded cries. He saw the tramps running, and the farmers chasing after them. Where he stood was nothing but that telltale hole in the ground, the burning barn, and beyond that darkness.

His resolution was taken.

He ran to where his wheel rested by the fence and mounted it.

Mary Ellen and the woman had gone down the road, and he sped after them.

The light of the fire still reddened the sky, but it had sunk so low by this time that it did not well illuminate that stretch of highway.

Jack rode half a mile, and saw nothing, heard nothing.

"They left the road and struck across the fields," he said.

He turned and rode back.

Coming to a place where the fence was broken down, seeming thus to invite passage, he lifted his wheel over it and rode on across the short grass of the meadow land, away from the fire.

"When those men come back and find me gone they'll be sure I'm one of the counterfeiter," was his conclusion; "but let them think so; I can explain later, and whether they believe me or not perhaps won't matter. I can find people who will believe me and understand that I am telling the truth."

And he rode on, stopping now and then to listen, while behind him the fire threw its red against the black background of the sky.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### STRIKING THE TRAIL.

The time was almost morning when Jack Lightfoot thus wheeled away from the burning barn in pursuit of the woman and the child.

Riding across the field, he came to another road that paralleled the one he had left.

But he had seen nothing of Mrs. Barron and Mary Ellen.

He hesitated again when he reached this road.



Looking at the eastern sky, he saw that dawn was at hand.

"I'm up against it! I can't very well help Mary Ellen, unless I know where she is."

Highland was nearer than Cranford. He had been on the point of riding to Highland, it will be remembered; and he might have done that now, but for the fact that he feared the report which the farmers would soon be circulating everywhere.

Those farmers, who had gone in chase of the tramps, were sure that Jack belonged to the band of counterfeitters whose secret hiding place and workshop had been revealed by the breaking in of the little tunnel leading from the barn. Hence, it was apparent that the vicinity of the farmhouse and that whole section of country, in fact, was now dangerous neighborhood for him.

Jack did not fear the ultimate result of being held by the farmers on that foolish charge, but he did not want to be delayed and be put to the vast trouble of proving himself innocent, while the tramps and Barron were hastening out of the country with the child.

Jack recalled that the tramps had spoken of the Painted Cave as a rendezvous.

"If I see nothing of them when daylight comes I'll start for the cave," was his thought.

And this suited him in other ways, for the Painted Cave was on the road to Cranford, and in Cranford he had friends who would believe him and stand ready to help him in any undertaking.

He climbed the fence, swung his wheel over into the road and, mounting, pedaled slowly along in the Cranford direction, stopping now and then to listen.

He was almost sure that the woman and the child had reached this road in crossing the field. Whether they had gone up or down, or had crossed on into the next field, he could not determine; so that now, in thus pedaling along, he was trusting purely to blind luck to help him. At the same time, it seemed safe to wheel in the direction of the Painted Cave.

Until now Jack had been oblivious to the fact that his feet and legs were wet.

He had tumbled into the old well in the barn, falling into water that reached well up toward his knees.

That had saved him, doubtless, from being killed by the fall of the burning roof; but at the same time it had soaked his feet and legs, and his crawl through the tunnel had not improved his personal appearance.

When daylight came and he had seen nothing of Mrs. Barron, he dismounted from his wheel at the roadside and tried to tidy himself up a bit. He washed his face and hands and wiped them with his handkerchief. He took off his wet shoes and wrung out his stockings as well as he could.

While doing this he began to feel the pangs of hunger. He had eaten nothing since the noon before, in Cardiff.

Having replaced his shoes and stockings, he wheeled on again until a farmhouse by the roadside invited him.

Though the sun had not yet risen, there was a stir of life at the house, and he saw a man come out of a milking shed.

"I'll try to get some breakfast, and I'll find out just how far it is to Cranford; and perhaps I can get some other information worth while."

So he turned in at the farmhouse, and riding round to the kitchen door, dismounted.

A woman stood there who looked at him curiously.

"Would it be possible for me to get a breakfast here?" he asked.

And, not wishing her to think him a tramp or beggar, he took out some coins.

She looked at him again curiously, before speaking.

"Breakfast ain't ready yet," she answered; "but I can give you some bread and a bowl of milk, or, if you'll wait, you can have breakfast with us."

Jack did not want to linger.

"Thank you; I'll take the bread and milk."

She brought them to him, and he sat on the bench by the door while he ate.

She began to question him about the fire, and if he had seen the ruins of the barn, and asked also if he thought it was the work of tramps, or of the counterfeitters who, it had been discovered, had a hiding place there. It was plain that there was a purpose in her inquiries, and that, having heard of the young fellow



who had ridden away on a bicycle, she was wondering if she was not now talking with him.

Jack was on the point of enlightening her, but checked himself, when he remembered that he was still in that danger zone, where he might be arrested on suspicion and taken to Highland.

He was not willing to go to Highland just then, having other purposes in his mind. So, while he answered with apparent fullness, he was careful what he said.

The man came from the milking shed, and he, too, looked at Jack queerly, and asked questions.

"If I don't get out of here he'll want to hold me," was Jack's thought.

So he paid for what he had eaten and rode on, glad to get away so easily.

At the turn of the road, a half a mile further along, where there was a wood on one side which reached back to some hills behind this farmhouse, Jack stopped and looked back.

What he saw well repaid him.

Barron had come to the farmhouse, where he had received a "hand out," and was turning back toward the woods, from which, apparently, he had come.

Turning his wheel, Jack now sped swiftly back along the road.

But Barron saw him approaching, and ducking behind the stables, managed to keep them between him and Jack, while he hurried to the shelter of the woods.

Jack came up to the farmhouse, pedaling at top speed; but he did not stop till he reached the barn, where a fence interposed. Barron had crossed this fence.

Jack swung his wheel over it and then climbed over himself.

When he had rounded the barn he saw Barron on the edge of the woods, running.

The ground between was level grassland, covered with soft, new grass, and over it Jack sent his wheel spinning.

He heard an outcry behind him, and turning his head he saw the man running across the yard and the woman in the kitchen door. Jack did not stop to hear what they said or to look further.

When he arrived at the edge of the woods Barron was out of sight.

The strip of woods was of no great width, however, and through it Jack could see the light of the sky beyond.

He found a path which seemed to lead in the direction Barron had taken, and he rode along it.

But there were so many interfering bushes, that part of the time he had to dismount and walk, which delayed him greatly.

Yet, when he came out on the other side, where there was another road, he again saw Barron.

By rapid running Barron had made a great gain in distance, while Jack was working through the woods and was now well down the road.

He was running toward what seemed a broken bridge. Beyond the bridge was a horse and wagon that apparently awaited his coming.

The thought popped into Jack's head that the woman and Mary Ellen were in that wagon.

Jack's ideas as to the course he would pursue when he overtook the hobo were not very clear. He was resolved to at least keep the man in sight.

As he climbed the fence, lifting his wheel over, he saw something that again stirred him. This was Mary Ellen, who had run out from the wagon and was pursued by the woman. Jack was too far away to hear what passed, but he saw the child dragged back toward the wagon, into which she was thrown with as little ceremony as if she were a bundle of old clothes.

All this Jack saw, as he swung his wheel over the fence and pushed it out into the road.

Then he mounted and wheeled toward the bridge.

As he drew near, rapidly gaining now on Barron, he discovered that the bridge was but a skeleton and was being repaired. He saw Barron run across what seemed to be a narrow girder, high over the water.

The bridge hung above a stream, over a sort of deep gulch, in a rough country, the hills Jack had seen from the other road becoming prominent here.

The tramp crossed safely on the high girder, and ran toward the wagon, moving at a speed that showed he feared the boy who was following him.

"They've got to go straight down that road,"



thought Jack, "and that will take them in the direction of Cranford. They're heading toward the Painted Cave. Well, if they go there and stay there any length of time I'll see that it's a trap for them, all right."

The horse and wagon were awaiting the coming of Barron, Jack knew now, and he knew the wagon would start on before he could reach it.

Having crossed the bridge, the tramp slowed his gait. He felt sure Jack would not try to cross that dangerous girder on his wheel. Yet when Jack reached the bridge he did not hesitate an instant.

Seeing that Barron was afraid of him, determined to do something for Mary Ellen, and having right on his side, Jack rode out on the dangerous footpath, where a slip or a moment's inattention would have toppled him into the gorge.

Barron stood staring in awed wonder, when he saw that; but heedless of danger, Jack pedaled out upon the narrow girder of the dismantled bridge, bent on overtaking the fugitive hobo.

Jack had learned one thing, through the various experiences that had come to him in the past few months, and that is, that the guilty man or boy is a coward. Guilt makes a coward of everyone. Barron was showing this cowardly tendency now in running. The knowledge that he was worse than a pretended tramp; a counterfeiter, in fact, with the law reaching for him, and that, in addition, he and the woman with him were abductors, liable to terms in prison for stealing that child away from her home and her parents, took all the fight out of him, and made him tremble at sight of the heroic youth who was rushing across the perilous bridge in pursuit.

Barron turned and fled, with a cry of fear gurgling from his lips when he saw that Jack was going to cross in safety.

He had hoped Jack would tumble into the stream; but the lad was too cool, too clear-headed, and, altogether, too steady of eye and of nerve, to do anything of the kind.

Though the height of the girder from the ground and the roaring, rushing water beneath would have sent many a brain spinning with giddiness, it had no such effect on the steady brain of Jack Lightfoot. He

rode across with as sure a footing as if he had been merely pedaling along a pavement.

Then the wheel dropped from the girder into the roadway, and Jack sent it whizzing toward the wagon.

But Barron had reached the vehicle, had climbed to the driver's seat, and, taking up the lines, was sending the horse along the road at a quick gallop.

The woman and the child had disappeared, lying down in the wagon.

Some distance ahead the road was girthed on each side by timbered land. The fleeing horse and wagon reached this place, where the shadows of morning still lay heavily, making the spot resemble a dark pocket, or the opening into a tunnel.

The wagon was going at fast speed, yet Jack was rapidly overtaking it.

But if Jack could have seen within the wagon at that moment, he might not have followed with such confidence; for the woman had sighted a rifle at his breast, and was trying to steady her hand that she might shoot him dead in the dark stretch of road.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LUCKY PUNCTURE.

Jack's persistent pursuit of the Barrons, combined with his interference between them and the child the previous evening, had enraged both the man and the woman against him.

The belief had come to them that he was the Nemesis who would drive them to prison or to death. His persistence in dogging them terrified them.

"Down 'im!" Barron had snarled, to the woman. "This is the place to do it in."

He slowed the wagon, as he drove it into the gloom of the tree shadows; and the woman, lying in the wagon, pointed the gun barrel through a crack.

Mary Ellen saw and understood, that the youth who had been so kind to her, and who for that reason she felt that she loved, was to be killed.

In spite of the fact that she knew it would bring upon her a horrible flogging, she tugged at the dress of the woman, as she saw the hag sighting the rifle.



The woman's aim was spoiled.

She dropped the gun, and with a blow of her fist sent the child reeling.

The cry of pain that came from the lips of Mary Ellen, reached Jack, and he pedaled faster.

He was drawing so near that the woman had no trouble now in leveling the rifle upon his breast, just below his cap, as he bent over, thrusting his head low to give power to his legs and speed to the wheel.

Mary Ellen, stunned and terrified, and half dazed with the pain and shock of the blow, did not interfere again; and Barron, to give the woman the better aim, stopped the horse.

Then the rifle cracked.

Jack Lightfoot, at the same instant, shot forward from his wheel, turning a somersault, end over end, in the dust of the road.

Barron laid the lash on the back of the horse; and the animal started with a jump.

"Gad, ye got 'im!" he squeaked, in a sort of blind terror.

The woman looked from the rear of the wagon, as the horse galloped wildly on, driven by the stinging lash which Barron now used mercilessly.

"Yes," she said, slowly, while her eyes glowed and her face whitened, "I got him!"

"He won't foller us furdher," said Barron.

"No," said the woman, again speaking slowly, "but others will. He'll be found there; and then——"

The fear of that gripped her hard heart.

As if to revenge herself further, or still the terror of that struggle within her, she again dealt Mary Ellen a blow; and again the child, shrinking from her as far as she could, cried out in pain and fear.

But Jack Lightfoot did not now hear the cry of Mary Ellen.

He was lying in the road as if dead, but was not even seriously hurt; the bullet had not touched him. As the woman pressed the trigger, aiming the murderous weapon, his front tire had struck a sharp stone, which ripped a hole in it, flattening it like a pancake; which was the thing that had shot him headlong into the road, and not the bullet.

It was a lucky puncture, for it had saved his life.

The bullet had whistled harmlessly over his head.

But the Barrons believed that he had been cut down by the murderous lead, and they drove wildly on, the man lashing the horse.

They wanted to get as far from that grewsome spot as they could before the body they fancied was lying there should be discovered by some passing farmer on a wagon.

And as they thus fled they were alternating with joy over the death they believed they had consummated and fear of discovery and of the law.

Scarcely were they out of sight around a bend in the road, hidden by the shadows and the trees, when Jack rose to his feet, limping a little, and walked to his wheel, brushing the dust from his clothing.

He had heard the crack of the rifle and the whistle of the ball as he shot forward from the bicycle, and knew he had been fired at from the wagon.

But more serious even than that, it seemed to him now, was the discovery he made of the puncture that crippled his wheel.

"That's bad!" he said. "Now they'll get away, sure, for I can't make any speed on this thing, with the front tire torn like that."

Then he thought of Mary Ellen, and, recalling that last scream, his heart ached again for the hapless little girl whom he was now powerless to aid.

Yet even then Jack Lightfoot did not despair of accomplishing the thing to which he had set his hand without hope of any other reward than the approval of his own conscience.

Jack was not of the despairing kind.

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## CHAPTER X.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO TOM LIGHTFOOT.

On the road that passed near the Painted Cave, some distance out of Cranford, four boys were pedaling along at a brisk gait.

They were Tom Lightfoot, Lafe Lampton, Jube Marlin and Wilson Crane; and they were out for a morning spin, having taken this road by chance, as much as anything else.

As they passed along, talking and laughing, Tom



Lightfoot lagged now and then behind, to make a study of something that interested him, rejoining his companions a little later by faster speeding.

Tom Lightfoot was a good deal of a naturalist, and a hard student, as well as a creditable athlete. For that reason the rocks he saw now and then along the road had various stories to tell him.

The history of the rocks is as interesting as any story ever written, and what they have to tell of periods of time long past, of earthquake fires, of glacial grinding and the like, every boy who desires to be well informed should try to make himself acquainted with.

In addition to the rocks that now and then caused Tom to stop, were the lichens which grew on the rocks and trees, the delicate flowers that lifted themselves from the crannies, together with the birds and the butterflies that flitted here and there in the morning sunshine.

In his trips into the country Tom always carried in his pocket a little magnifying glass, which helped him in his studies. Sometimes when he found an interesting specimen, he took it home, to further study it there with the magnifier, and perhaps look up something about it in a book.

As a result of such studies, and because his reading was of a wide and varied kind, there was no better informed boy in Cranford than Tom Lightfoot, Jack's cousin.

Yet Tom was not at all a dull companion, as some people foolishly think a student must be. The boys often called him Bookworm, but they never thought of calling him dull; they could not do that, for Tom was lively, full of fun, pranks and jokes, and loved a game of manly sport as well as any boy could.

As Tom thus idled along the road, following behind the other boys, he saw, down a side road that here opened through the woods, a large, mushroomy growth on a tree.

Tom's teacher had been talking about this kind of fungus only the day before, and had made some statement about it that Tom now thought he would like to verify. So he left the main road and wheeled down the dim path through the woods.

When he reached the tree and examined the fungus

and was ready to go on again, he saw another path through the woods, by taking which he could probably cut off a considerable distance and overtake his companions sooner.

Hence, he entered this path, instead of turning back to the main road.

He held the section of fungus in his hands which he had cut away with his knife, and was looking at it, not giving particular heed to the path he was following, when his wheel struck something, which sent him flying from the seat.

The thing with which the tire had come in contact was a section of grapevine stretched across the path.

Tom saw that, almost as soon as he struck the ground, and was proceeding to blame himself for his carelessness, when he was surrounded by some trampish figures, that rushed at him.

Tom still lay on the ground, and was so astonished that he did not know what to think or say. He saw that there were four men, one woman, and one child; and out beyond, dimly to be seen, was a wagon and a horse.

"When you gits away from us dis time, you knows it!" cried one of the men, who was none other than Barron, dropping back into the tramp lingo that he affected at times.

Tom tried to scramble to his feet, but was seized by one of the men, who hurled him angrily to the ground.

The woman came forward, peering at him, dragging the child by the hand.

"So you wasn't hit by that bullet at all!" she said, as if she could not believe it. "What made you tumble?"

Tom Lightfoot did not know what she was talking about.

"I guess you've made some kind of a mistake," he said, not pleased with the looks cast on him.

"Nit, we ain't!" said one of the men. "We know youse, all right."

"I don't know you."

"Oh, cheese it! Do youse t'ink you kin feed us dat?"

Barron stood before him, arms akimbo, staring his



hate with that one evil eye, the scar that ran from his red beard into his dusty red hair making him a fearful figure to contemplate. It almost made Tom shudder to look at him.

Tom tried again to get on his feet, but was again caught by the shoulder.

"This isn't funny," said Tom, growing angry. "Stand out of my way and let me ride along."

"No, 'tain't funny!" said Barron. "We ain't never t'inkin' dat it was funny. De way youse has follered us don't make us laugh."

The woman tried to laugh, and made a failure of it; but she pushed forward, devouring Tom with her fierce eyes.

"Look an' see if that bullet didn't scrape him some place. I can't understand it."

"I think you must all be crazy," said Tom. "Take your hand off me, can't you, and let me go? I'm in a hurry."

All laughed, in a gurgling, unpleasant manner.

"Oh, he's in a hurry!"

"That's what I said; I'm in a hurry."

"Youse been in a great hurry, all night an' all mornin'. Now we're goin' to let youse rest a while, see?"

"Wot did you do wit' dat plate an' dat swag we gives yer?" one of the men demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Take your hands off of me!"

He pushed the man away.

"Oh, youse wasn't in dat hole wit' us last night, an' youse don't know nuttin' about anyting?"

"I'm sure that I don't know what you're talking about, if that's what you mean."

"Where's dat plate?" the man demanded, fiercely. "We wants dat. Did youse hand it over to one o' dem grangers?"

"You're too much for me," Tom averred; "I declare to you I don't know what you're talking about."

"What's dat you got in yer hand?"

"That's fungus."

"Goin' ter eat it?"

"No, of course not."

Tom could see that he was the victim of some mis-

take, but he did not know what it was. Yet, the trampish criminals had made what was for them a very natural error. They simply believed that Tom was Jack Lightfoot.

The two boys resembled each other very much. Jack was slightly taller and sturdier of build; but they had the same gray-blue eyes, features much the same, the same color of hair, and it chanced that this morning Tom Lightfoot's clothing was almost a duplicate in looks of that worn by Jack. In addition, it is to be remembered that these men had only seen Jack under circumstances that were not calculated to give them any accurate knowledge of his personal appearance.

They simply knew that this boy resembled Jack Lightfoot; and he had ridden over that path through the woods, close by the Painted Cave, slowly riding along, as if he were peering and prying and trying to discover their hiding place. Seeing him coming, they had stretched the grapevine rope across the path, and had bagged him.

"If you won't let me go," said Tom, "please tell me what you intend to do."

Barron's scarred face took on a fiercer expression.

"Kid," he said, speaking in a way to terrify almost anyone, "when we gits through wid youse, you won't be askin' any questions at all; do youse understand wot dat means?"

He drew out the knife with which he had once tried to strike Jack, and moved toward Tom.

"We'll settle youse right here!"

Seeing that knife, and believing with the men that the boy was Jack Lightfoot, Mary Ellen screamed, unable to control herself.

Then Tom saw something that made his heart leap and his face burn, and caused him to spring up and confront the villain with the knife.

That was the sight of the woman catching the screaming child by the ear and literally dragging her over the ground as if she would pull the ear from the child's head.

"You old wretch!" Tom shouted at her, and tried to move toward her.

"Help yourself!" she snapped, again giving the ear so fierce a pull that Tom, horrified, saw blood spurt



from it. "I'll pull her ear out by the roots if I want to, and you can't help yourself."

She turned on him, wild as a panther; while the child fell to the ground, crying and writhing in pain.

"It was 'cause you interfered the first time on her account that this trouble's come, and why you've got into the pickle that you're in now."

"And he won't git out o' it!" said Barron, again lifting the knife.

"Better take him to ther cave 'fore youse does the job," one of the men advised; "dere'll be blood out here and maybe a rumpus, and it might lead ter discovery; better jump him inter de cave, an' finish 'im dere."

Then Tom Lightfoot knew that his life was in danger, and that these men had fully made up their minds to murder him.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A MEETING OF FRIENDS.

Jack Lightfoot had made what progress he could toward the Painted Cave, in spite of that puncture, which he had no way to mend. The front tire was useless, but where the roads were good he rode his wheel, carrying it over bad places, and trundling it up the hills.

His progress seemed slow to him, but he stuck to the work with a persistence that was almost as good as speed, and he was not so very far behind Barron and his wagon when the wooded hills that marked the vicinity of the Painted Cave were reached.

He had hastened toward the Painted Cave, after losing sight of the horse and wagon, because of what he had heard the tramps say in that chamber under ground, where the counterfeiter's outfit was sheltered.

As Jack approached the Painted Cave, trundling his wheel most of the time, for the road was rather poor and filled with stones, he was surprised, at a turn, to come face to face with Lafe Lampton, Jubal Marlin and Wilson Crane.

He was not only surprised, he was delighted. A smile came to drive away the tired look from his face.

When they saw him they quickened their pace and came up, shouting to him:

"Hello, got a bad puncture!" said Lafe, when he saw that Jack was carrying his torn tire.

"A lucky puncture," said Jack.

"By granny," exclaimed Jube, "I shouldn't call it a lucky puncture, if I got a tire ripped up in that way!"

"But you would if it saved your life."

The boys stared.

"I should call anything lucky that saved my life," said Crane. "You ripped it when you weren't riding, and that saved you from a bad tumble, I suppose?"

Then Jack explained.

The explanation was so startling that it threw the boys into a flutter of excitement.

"They came this way," said Jack, "and I've been following them. They were heading for the Painted Cave."

Wilson stared more than ever. He had been caught and held in that cave once, with Jack Lightfoot, by some tramps, and it was an experience he was not likely to forget.

"Likely they're the fellows we had our fun with that time, Wilson,"

"I don't care about havin' any more of that kind of fun."

"You were taking a ride out this way," said Jack. "If you don't have to hurry back too fast I'm going to ask you to go with me to the cave, and we'll see if those tramps are in it. We'll try to be careful and keep them from seeing us. They've got a horse and wagon, which they'll have to hide out in the woods, I think. If they're in there, we'll get word to Cranford in a hurry and have them arrested."

"Tom's back there somewhere," said Lafe. "He's loafing along the road somewhere, looking for stray bugs and other things. We've been riding slow, thinking he'd soon catch up with us."

"We'll go on then and meet him," said Jack. "Tom is just the fellow for a thing of this kind."

They moved back along the wood, talking excitedly of the tramps, and of the queer experiences Jack had met while away from Cranford.

"If the hoboes are in the cave we'll send Wilson to town for Kennedy, and he can have Kennedy bring



out a lot of deputies, and the rascals will be bagged right there," remarked Jack.

This meeting with his friends, at a time when he was becoming very tired, and when he so much felt the need of help, overjoyed him.

"I've hung to this thing simply to help that little girl," he admitted. "It's a shame the way that child is abused. Those people are killing her by inches, and she's the child of respectable people, I'm sure. It's an outrage that oughtn't to be allowed to go on another day."

Jack was thoroughly aroused on this point and relentless. He did not intend to abandon this work until Barron and the woman were in jail and the child rescued.

As they thus rode along they heard the scream of a child.

It came from the woods off beyond the Painted Cave.

Jack stopped stock-still, and the others did the same.

"That was her!" he said. "I'll bet anything on it! They're out there somewhere, and that woman is beating her again."

"They hastened now.

A few minutes later a call rang through the woods that startled them.

"Coo-ee! coo-ee! coo-ee!"

It was a call that had great carrying power, and it was three times repeated, in quick succession.

It thrilled the bicycle boys to their very marrow.

For it was the "help" call of the Cranford nine; and when made in that way—three such calls in quick succession—it meant that the one making it was in peril and needed help, or that something had occurred out of the ordinary which demanded the presence of friends at once.

The "Coo-ee" call was used by the Cranford boys a good deal, in various forms; and the manner in which it was uttered formed a sort of signal code which was useful on more than one occasion.

"That's Tom!" said Jack.

"And he needs help!" shouted Lafe, beginning to pedal.

"Ran into those tramps, maybe," said Wilson.

Jack dropped his wheel by the side of the road, and while the other boys pedaled along he ran after them at a sprinting pace, sure that Tom Lightfoot needed help, and needed it quickly.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A YOUNG ATHLETE AMONG THE HOBOES.

Tom Lightfoot had no intention of being dragged into the Painted Cave and murdered without resistance.

So, when one of the men came toward him for the purpose of pulling him along, Tom uttered the "Coo-ee" call for help, and then landed a blow in the rascal's face that sent him reeling.

Having done that, to the astonishment of the hoboos who had not guessed that he meant to attempt anything of the kind, he jumped to the nearest rock and put his back against it.

He saw he could not escape by running, for the men hemmed him in. The rock was right at hand, and almost at his back before he made that quick leap.

The man had fallen in a heap, and the others stood staring at the young athlete who had so promptly knocked him down.

The woman laughed scornfully, though she was nervous.

"Air ye goin' to let a kid knock ye out that way?" she said.

The man who been knocked down, arose, cursing.

"What did youse mean by hollerin' dat way?" asked Barron, feeling his knife, and looking as if he sought a chance to rush in.

"That was just my little war whoop," Tom answered.

"It wasn't a call fer help?"

"Well, yes; I've got friends close here. I think they'll hear it."

"Rats!"

"Call 'em that if you want to."

Tom was on his guard, with his hands and arms ready, for he knew that the men moving constantly nearer to him, thus closing in, would be likely to jump at him presently.

"We know youse ain't got any friends here, all



right," said Barron. "Youse has been follerin' us all mornin'. You follered us frum dat house, and you still kep' at it; and youse has follered us to yer death, see?"

Then he dashed at Tom, striking with the knife.

He drove low down, at Tom's body, to avoid the swing of Tom's hard fist.

Tom could not have desired it better.

His foot flew out, and, catching Barron in the face, sent him backward as suddenly as the hard fist had sent the other rascal.

That kick in the face, which laid Barron out and sent the knife spinning, opened that old scar on the scoundrel's face, and set it to bleeding.

He howled with rage and pain as he struck the ground, and the other rascals dashed in, to finish the work he had left undone.

They had their knives out, and if they could have reached Tom they would have sliced him into ribbons.

The woman, wicked and vindictive as the men, urged them on with fierce cries.

Crack!

One of them received a stinger in the eye that closed that optic and bowled him back into the arms of his friend, thus putting two out at the same time; and the third, finding it safer to withdraw, rushed to get the knife Barron had let fall.

Barron rose to his feet, half blinded by the blood that trickled into his one eye.

"Come on!" shouted Tom, thoroughly aroused. "If you think I am going to stand still and be killed by you, you're mistaken."

They came on again, but with more caution, spreading out so that he could not easily pass them.

Tom again set his back to the rock.

His gray-blue eyes were blazing and his rather fair face was flushed now to a deep red. His lips were apart and his breath came in panting gasps. He realized the peril of his position, and was resolved to fight for his life to the uttermost.

"Come on!" he cried, panting out the words.

His attitude was so courageous that the trampish rascals hesitated.

"Are you skeered of one boy?" howled the woman. "Why don't ye do 'im up?"

One of the tramps drew a revolver.

"This'll fix 'im!" he said. "No use gittin' knocked down fer nuttin'. Dis'll fix him!"

"No shootin'!" said Barron, who feared that a shot would betray them to some one passing along the road.

"But he's already made a noise, hollerin'."

"Where's that knife? I ain't afraid of him. Gimme that knife, an' I'll settle 'im in short order."

He seized the knife which the other man had snatched from the ground, and with blood streaming down over his face advanced upon Tom with the recklessness and the fury of a fiend. And he was truly a frightful sight, as he thus came forward.

Tom dodged sideways, as Barron, rushing in, struck with the knife, and again planted a blow, but Barron was expecting it, and received it on his neck.

Though it was a jarring one it did not shake him, and he struck again.

"Rush 'im!" he said, as Tom hurled him backward with a blow that was better delivered.

And then all four men, chagrined by being set at defiance by one boy, rushed in, striking with their knives and their fists.

Mary Ellen, seeing that frightful fracas, and believing that the boy attacked would be killed instantly, uttered another scream, which she could not suppress, and was knocked flat by the woman.

Then there was a wild and quick transformation.

The underbrush cracked.

Four boys came leaping out, armed with clubs.

They were Jack Lightfoot, Lafe Lampton, Jubal Marlin and Wilson Crane.

Their advent on the scene was so unexpected, and the sight of Jack, whom they thought they had before them with his back to the rock, was a discovery so paralyzing to the men that the spirit of fight was pretty well taken out of them.

With a bound like a deer Jack reached Tom's side, just as Tom reeled under a blow given him by Barron.

One swoop of the club, striking Barron on the head, felled him like a log.

Two of the tramps started to run.



One of these Lafe Lampton knocked down with his club.

The other two sprinted for dear life, throwing the boys aside and fleeing in sheer terror.

The woman tried to reach the cover of the undergrowth, dragging the screaming child by the arm.

"Look after Tom," Jack shouted, and took off in pursuit of the woman.

He overhauled her at the edge of the brushy growth.

"I'll have to ask you to stop a while," he said, and he caught her by the shoulders.

She turned on him with blazing eyes, and, jerking a little pistol from her pocket, threw it up and fired.

The bullet sped over his head. The next instant the revolver was knocked to the ground.

The child had run to Jack, and caught him by the legs, as if in that way she sought protection.

Confronting the infuriated woman, Jack put down his hand and touched Mary Ellen's head.

"You don't leave this place until you've accounted for this child!" he declared, sternly.

"Will I stay here for you?" she shrieked.

"I think you will," he said, his voice shaking. "I don't want to lay hands on a woman, but I shall do so if you make me. You're going to stay here."

Barron was lying senseless by the rock, and the other tramp who had been knocked down was holding his own aching head with his hands and seemed not to know what had happened.

The other hoboos were seeking safety in rapid flight.

Seeing that the tramps who had been knocked out were in no condition to get away, and that Tom was not seriously hurt, the boys came leaping to Jack's assistance.

Then the woman surrendered, but with very bad grace, fuming out her wrath and denouncing them for what she called their "impertinence."

\* \* \* \* \*

Barron and the woman, and the other tramp who had been knocked out by a blow from a club, were conducted by the boys into Cranford.

Jack walked behind them with the revolver which had belonged to the woman, and the other boys formed a guard.

They were lodged in the Cranford jail, in charge of Kennedy; and then telegrams were sent out to the surrounding towns, telling how and why they had been captured.

Before noon a reporter of the Cardiff daily was at Jack's house, interviewing him concerning his experiences.

A posse of men had gone from Highland, the reporter said, to the rendezvous under the burned barn, which Jack had so strangely discovered; and communication had been secured with people in New York who were believed to be the parents of Mary Ellen Traverse, the little girl rescued through Jack's efforts.

The Cardiff papers of that evening and the next morning, and the newspapers of the big cities as well, regaled their readers with a strange and sensational story, which told how one sturdy and heroic youth had unearthed a band of counterfeiters, who had been posing as wandering tramps, and how, through his coolness and courage, two of the chief men of the counterfeiters' band had been landed, and the long-lost daughter of Guy Traverse, of New York, had been found.

The next day Mr. and Mrs. Traverse appeared at Cranford from New York.

They identified their daughter, and there was more praise for Jack, in the papers of the country, and in the town of Cranford as well, in addition to the promise of a reward from the police authorities for unearthing the counterfeiters.

Traverse offered Jack a reward also, but this Jack refused.

"No," he said, sturdily. "If the authorities want to pay me something for bringing about those arrests, well and good. But I don't want to take anything for what I did for Mary Ellen. I would do it all over again, and be glad to, if circumstances were again the same."

"You've given me back my mamma and papa," said Mary Ellen, "and I love you for that!"

Which certainly was reward enough for Jack.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 14, will contain "Jack Light-foot; the Magician, or, Quelling a Mutiny in the Nine." This is another capital baseball story, which all interested in the great American game will want to read. You will want to know about that mutiny, who stirred it up, how it was settled, and all about the great game.



# A CHAT WITH YOU

Under this general head we purpose each week to sit around the camp fire, and have a heart-to-heart talk with those of our young readers who care to gather there, answering such letters as may reach us asking for information with regard to various healthy sports, both indoor and out. We should also be glad to hear what you think of the leading characters in your favorite publication. Besides answering the various letters and giving advice on athletics, it is our intention to furnish from time to time short essays upon timely topics, such as "How to pitch a drop ball," and other things that most boys desire to know, told in a manner that may be easily understood. It is the editor's desire to make this department one that will be eagerly read from week to week by every admirer of the Jack Lightfoot stories, and prove to be of valuable assistance in building up manly, healthy Sons of America. All letters received will be answered immediately, but may not appear in print under five weeks, owing to the fact that the publication must go to press far in advance of the date of issue. Those who favor us with correspondence will please bear this in mind, and exercise a little patience.

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Here are some figures, my measurements. How do I stand in the average class? One man connected with a gym. here tells me I am too heavy and ought to train down. Perhaps I am, but I thought he only wanted to drum up another recruit at ten dollars a year. Weight, 133 pounds; height, 5 feet 5½ inches; chest, 35 inches; thigh, 21 inches; calf, 14½ inches. How is it?

Indianapolis, Ind.

"DONOVAN."

The instructor was only telling you the truth, for you might easily knock off twelve or thirteen pounds and still be of the average weight for your size. As to the other measurements, they are slightly above the normal, but if you exercise enough to bring your weight down to 120 pounds, you will find that they will decrease in proportion, and that you can just fill the bill all round as a perfectly formed athlete. Cross-country walks, striking the bag, boxing, and bar exercise—be careful what sort of bar it is, for there is one species that ruins athletes every time—will gradually reduce your weight and harden your flabby muscles.

---

Though I have not seen anything to that effect, I take it for granted, Mr. Editor, that soon you will be receiving so many letters of applause, asking for information about athletics and such things, that you will think it necessary

as well as convenient, to open a department in the back of the book. They all do, and I imagine such a thing must be very popular, judging from the way in which the boys write.

I want to tell you what I think of Jack Lightfoot, as well as his friends and enemies. At the same time, I know how valuable space is, and shall keep my letter within as reasonable bounds as my enthusiasm will permit. Somehow I've taken a great fancy to Tom Lightfoot. He seems such a sensible fellow, who can be relied on every time. Jack is more talented, but there are occasions when he fails to make good through some cause or other. Of course I can see that the author means to build Jack's character up as he goes along, and it is a fine thing to attempt, which we will watch with great interest. All the same, good old Tom is my favorite. He has the stuff in him to make a hero, and I hope Mr. Stevens will, after a little, let Tom stand some in the center of the stage where the glare of the lime-light falls. I also feel good toward Lafe Lampton, and even the benighted believer in jiu-jitsu is an interesting character. I wonder if he will do something in that line by accident some day. If he does, my, what a cackle there will be. Wilson Crane has not been shown to possess any very admirable traits of character as yet, but I can see signs of promise there for a pretty good chap. Stick a pin in that for a prophecy, Mr. Editor. Of course I dislike Kirtland. We all know just such a conceited donkey, and have had trouble with him ourselves. Phil can do things, just a little under the standard Jack sets, and it makes his proud spirit mad to play second fiddle. About Tom, I know from the signs that after a while it is intended to take him off somewhere in the wilderness, perhaps hunting moose up in Canada or grizzly bears—somewhere, so that his reading and knowledge of things will come into play. That's Prophecy No. 2. I could write on for pages about those Cranford boys, I seem to know them so well, but I don't care to fill your wastebasket with my effusion. Hoping to see this in print,

JOS. E. CARLIN,

St. Joseph, Mo.

Your letter, though long, is interesting, and, we hope, will be read with profit by our boys. Others besides friend Jos. have conceived a fancy for quiet Tom—old, reliable Tom. Perhaps he may presently have his turn in the middle of the stage, as J. E. C. so ardently wishes; but just what glorious happenings the author has in view for the athletic boys when the baseball season is over we do not care to disclose, as it would be telling tales out of school.

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I would be very much obliged if you would tell me whether I am above or below the average, and what you



would advise to build up a better physique, if, as I fear, I am not up to the standard. I want to say a good word for Jack Lightfoot and his chums. They are the right sort. A fellow is bound to like them. And while Jack does a lot that may seem to be beyond the general run of fellows, still he shows no signs of being conceited. That is why I like him. Why, if it was Phil Kirtland who did all those stunts, there would be no peace in the camp, such airs he must put on. I hope you will print this. Please do not mention my name, but just what I sign,

A READER FROM NO. 1.

Dayton, Ohio.

We print this letter just to show how careless a boy may be in writing. It is all there but the important thing—the figures he intended to give—size of chest, thigh, height and weight. Plainly, without these we are unable to declare whether our young friend is above or below the average. Suppose A Reader from No. 1 tries again?

I am no kicker, and I don't want you to think so, but I must say I'm a little bit disappointed about Jack Lightfoot. In the beginning Mr. Stevens led us to believe that Jack must be a weak sort of a chap, inclined to shrink timidly when it began to look sort of stormy—in fact, I for one, made up my mind that Jack was going to have a high old time conquering that shrinking feeling, which made him imagine it was all of no use—the world was against him, and what was the good of trying. Well, we've seen this same Jack go through some pretty warm adventures by this time, and he doesn't seem to be troubled very much by that "tired feeling." To tell the truth, Jack is no quitter—he must have found his backbone in short order, to judge from the way he eats things up. Please give us more of baseball stories during the season. The first and second are prime, and I have no doubt, if it were put to a vote, the boys would be almost solid for the stories of the diamond. Suppose you tell us how Jack learned that wonderful "spit" ball. I thought it was a secret with Chesbro and a few others. Could an ordinary pitcher learn it, do you think? I hope you will make use of this letter. I understand that the dealers here sell a large number of ALL-SPORTS. J. G. R.

Westfield, N. J.

If the author has not brought Jack's most serious failing forward as frequently as our correspondent thinks should have been the case, perhaps it is for good reasons. He may have considered that Jack only gave way to this feeling of timidity under certain conditions; or else that with each successive encounter, Jack secured a better hold and was more able to keep his weakness under subjection. It was Mr. Stevens' intention in the beginning to show by set stages how a young fellow who had seldom been able to accomplish great things, pushed to the front just as soon as he shut his teeth together and vowed he would gain his end. Anyone can do it—there is no secret process about the thing. As regards the baseball stories, they will be numerous and exciting enough to please the most exacting. The author knows his game from A to Z, and those who follow the fortunes of the rival nines

will find scenes pictured by a wizard pen. We believe Jack is a character who will grow into the hearts of all true American lads, both North and South. Presently, when the arrangements we have under way are completed, you will learn all there is about the wonderful "spit ball"; also how even a tyro in the art of pitching may acquire the various trick balls used by great pitchers. We do not consider you as a "kicker," J. G. R.; only one in search of information.

Up our way the boys are of one opinion. We think ALL-SPORTS the coming weekly, and we intend to stand by it right along. The best thing about Mr. Stevens' writing is that he never mixes a fellow up. His language is simple and to the point. Boys like that sort of stuff. It makes them feel just as if they knew those Cranford fellows. And when it comes to a description of a rattling game of ball Mr. Stevens has them all beat to a standstill. He takes care of every little point, so that I declare it's almost as good as seeing the game yourself. Tell him to please give us plenty of this during the season, and I wish he would go deeper into that new "spit" ball of Jack's. We're all wondering how it's done, and our pitcher is reaching out everywhere to find the secret. Won't you tell us?

WILLIAM K. SMITH.

Burlington, Vt.

Thank you, William. Watch these Chat columns for a few weeks, and you will pick up considerable information in the line you seek.

Perhaps you'll consider it out of place that I should write you what I think of Jack Lightfoot. And there may not be many who will agree with me; but then, it would be a queer world, wouldn't it, if we all thought the same way. I sometimes feel that Jack is pretty much of a cad. The author makes much of Phil Kirtland always wanting to occupy first place—but it is Jack who takes it, Jack to whom the royal chances come to distinguish himself. How would he feel if he had to occupy a subordinate place? Now, I'm not prejudiced against Lightfoot, nor do I simply want to get up an argument; but, according to the way I see things, there are others among the Cranford boys who deserve the post of leader just as much as Jack. Why should he be always first? Perhaps you won't want to print this whine, because it is in the wrong key, but I'd truly like to know.

HALF-BACK.

We welcome criticism as well as praise, so long as it is sincere; but if you had kept a close tab upon Jack's methods you surely must have discovered ere now that he is a modest youth, not seeking the honors which his admiring chums insist upon thrusting on him. He is only human, and makes mistakes, as what boy does not; but upon being convinced that he is on the wrong side, Jack is frank and manly enough to confess himself in the wrong and change his position without delay. Under such an attack his friends should rally around his standard, and prove him to be anything but a "cad."—THE EDITOR.



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